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ABSTRACT

Because reading is first and foremost a language comprehension process focusing on the visual form of spoken language, such teaching strategies as language experience and assisted reading have much to offer beginning readers. These techniques have been slow to become accepted by many adult literacy instructors; however, the two strategies, particularly when used in combination, have more to offer to adult illiterates than to children who are learning to read. In essence, the language experience approach is based on a "dictate and read" strategy in which learners dictate or record brief statements pertaining to incidents of significance to their own life. These statements are then typed as soon as possible for the student to use as reading material. Text may be transcribed as it was dictated or may be scrambled. Assisted reading, which is a process of learning by immersion, is particularly effective when used in conjunction with the language experience approach. In the first of the three stages of assisted reading, the learner observes while an assistant moves a finger from word to word across the page while pronouncing them. In the second stage, the reader recognizes and vocalizes some of the words before the experienced reader supplies them. By the third stage, the beginning reader takes the initiative by pronouncing all the words he or she can while the assistant supplies the remaining words. Underlying both techniques is the assumption that reading is learned to a much greater extent than it is taught. (MN)

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TECHNíQUES

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Teaching Reading Through Language

by Edward V. Jones, George Mason University

Since reading is first and foremost a language comprehension process focusing on the visual form of spoken language, such teaching strategies as language experience and assisted reading, particularly a combination of the two, have much to offer beginning readers. Although this has been increasingly acknowledged by elementary school teachers, it has been less readily accepted by instructors of adult literacy. This is unfortunate because, if anything, these strategies have more to offer to adult illiterates than to children who are learning to read.

The vast majority of children, no matter how they are taught, eventually learn to break the code imposed by written language, become quickly familiar with the essentials of how print "works," and then refine their reading skills continually as they are immersed in printed materials on a daily basis throughout their school and life experience. By contrast, adult illiterates, regardless of the time they have spent in schools, have proven that the effort to make sense of printed symbols is, in their experience, a very difficult one and that written symbols which convey meaning to everyone else are, for them, abstract and bewildering. This is no academic theory about the problems adult illiterates have; this is in simplest terms what adult illiterates are. The issue, of course, is what we can do as teachers to reduce the mysteries of abstraction that adult illiterates find in written language and to help them to make sense of print.

Too often we have responded to these issues by compounding the problem that the student already faces – by increasing rather than reducing the abstraction that confronts the learner. Often this is accomplished with a series of drills and exercises relating to sound-symbol correspondences which make sense to any experienced reader (a teacher, for example) but are abstract and meaningless to a person unfamiliar with written language, especially a struggling adult non-reader. But if this is not the right approach, what might work better?

In the teaching and learning of reading, as in all teaching and learning, we need to build the strongest possible bridges between what learners already know and what they are trying to learn. In the case of the adult illiterate, a primary and essential resource is the student's own spoken language. By converting the learner's own words to written form and using these words and sentences as the student's first reading "text," a technique known as language experience, we can be assured that the learner is familiar with the vocabulary, the sentence structure, and the content encountered in beginning reading. In this manner, the beginning reader becomes accustomed to "how reading works," and to the appearance of his/her own phrases in print. The learner learns first, in effect, that reading is "talk written down." After beginning with his/her own talk, the student gradually moves to the talk of others (written down), but in the meantime his/her own language has provided a comfortable and personally meaningful foundation and context for the enlargement of sight vocabulary, observation of phonics generalizations, and other aspects of traditional reading instruction.

How to do Language Experience

In the basic language experience approach to reading instruction, the adult student is asked to dictate brief statements pertaining to incidents and circumstances of significance in his or her own life. The teacher may prompt and encourage the speaker with questions either of a general nature (What did you do at work today?) or, after becoming familiar with the student's background, of a more specific nature designed to draw out the learner's particular interests. As an alternative students who seem uncomfortable with direct questions may be presented with open-ended statements ("Last Friday when it snowed I . . . .") or short narratives of various kinds and asked to continue or to complete them.

Student statements are recorded either directly on paper by the teacher or on tape, and then read or replayed for student approval. These statements are then typed as soon as possible, ideally by the next class session. In order to assure the strongest possible connection with the student's spoken language

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(and also to prevent affronting the student with the suggestion that his/her language needs to be changed) the syntax of the printed version is preserved exactly as it was spoken. At this point teacher and learner may read together, using the assisted reading technique described below.

The basic "dictate and read" approach of language experience lends itself to several variations which may be helpful to students once they are familiar with the basic procedure. Primary among these is "scrambled dictation," in which statements dictated by the student are rearranged to prohibit the possibility of pure (reading *nothing but*) memorization. Since it is phrases which are rearranged (not individual words), however, and each phrase remains intact within itself, scrambled dictation represents an intermediate stage between focus on the student's own words and those written by others. (Example: The statement, "I drive my car to work at the factory every day except Friday," might be changed to "Every day except Friday I drive my car to work at the factory.")

How to do Assisted Reading

A technique which can be used effectively in conjunction with language experience is assisted (or echoic) reading (Hoskisson & Krohm, 1974), a process of learning by immersion. In this approach to reading instruction, the learner is always exposed to print in a full language context as opposed to the analysis of individual words and sounds. With the help of an "assistant" who reads to him, the functional illiterate gradually increases in reading independence.

There are three basic stages to assisted reading. In the first stage, as the beginning reader observes, the assistant moves a finger from word to word across the printed page and pronounces the words as they sound in normal spoken syntax (reading in meaningful phrases and sentences, not individual words). The beginning reader then repeats the same words as they are pointed to again. This cycle continues with the beginning reader repeating after the experienced reader in meaningful syntactic units, while carefully observing word-sound correspondences as they appear and sound in a full language context. Gradually, the beginning reader moves into the second stage of the assisted reading process. The learner now recognizes and vocalizes some of the words before they are supplied by the experienced reader. Finally, in the third stage of assisted reading, the beginning reader takes the initiative by pronouncing all the words he/she can, while only those which are still unrecognized are supplied by the assistant.

Assisted reading may first be combined with language experience and applied to reading content that the learner supplies. Later, a variety of material may be used to expose the learner to a breadth of written language. At the same time, however, use of familiar materials is continued in order to reinforce learning and to increase reader confidence.

Conclusion

The primary assumptions underlying both language experience and assisted reading are, of course, that reading is *learned* to a much greater extent than it is taught and that it can be learned most effectively when a minimum of unfamiliar abstraction is imposed on the learner. The same principle applies when children begin to develop oral language. A young child learns to speak through constant exposure to spoken words. No one really teaches a child to speak except by providing (a) labels for objects and actions which have already attracted his or her attention and (b) continued feedback and reinforcement in response to the child's progressive efforts at sound approximation. In a similar manner, the adult learns to read by immersion in print and through repeated opportunities to observe how printed language "works" while gradually refining his/her skills and fluency. This does not mean, of course, that there is no value in learning sound-symbol correspondences, but rather that these correspondences should not be the beginning or the focal point of instruction. The novice can be easily overwhelmed by the sheer number of "rules," and even if all of these were to be remembered there would still be considerable difficulty in determining which rule might apply in a given instance. Smith (1971) illustrates the latter problem by speculating on the number of alternative ways the letters *ho* might be pronounced at the beginnings only of different words. As a list of possibilities he suggests: hot, hoot, hook, hour, honest, house hope, honey, hoist.

If the learner is to profit from learning particular phonics generalizations and other decoding skills, these must be presented at a time when the student already knows some words and has a feel for how written language works. Even at this point, careful selection and timing of the "rules" is absolutely essential if these are to be effectively employed.